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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to help trainers working in the context of community-wide programs in all aspects of building a training program for study circle facilitators. Part 1 presents guidelines and principles for good training, basic training agenda for a 6-hour program, and annotated training agenda with notes about the process in each section and exercise descriptions. Part 2 covers the training content, arranged in sequence to match the agenda in part 1. Topics are as follows: what a study circle is, what a community-wide program is, a typical study circle session, typical "round" of study circles in a community-wide program, key facilitation skills, dealing with typical challenges, and a session-by-session outline. The material may be reproduced for handouts or overhead transparencies. Part 3 presents information on building and supporting an ongoing training program, including recruitment, skill building, advice on co-facilitation, training young people as facilitators, and other related information. Part 4 provides suggestions for training other trainers of study circle facilitators. Part 5 presents evaluation strategies and forms. Part 6 contains 14 references and an annotated list of 2 resource and 2 professional organizations. Appendixes include the following: the article, "Working on Common Cross-cultural Communication Challenges" (Marcelle E. DuPraw, Marya Axner); four stages of group development and process; and basic steps in creating a community-wide study circle. (YLB)

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A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators

Study Circles Resource Center,
a project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guide

This guide is designed to help you train study circle facilitators. Study circles – small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions – provide settings for deliberation, for working through social and political issues, for coming up with action strategies, for connecting to policy making, and for building community.

Facilitators play a critical role in establishing the productive, face-to-face dialogue that is the hallmark of study circle discussions. They ensure that what happens *inside* each group is consistent with the overall goals of a study circle program: democratic deliberation, broad and diverse participation, and shared problem solving. The facilitator is key to making the small-group dialogue work, by helping the members to engage with each other and the issue, and enabling citizens to work together effectively.

Trained study circle facilitators are an essential ingredient in the wide variety of community-based programs around the country – in congregation pairings, youth programs, university-based programs, and community-wide efforts. This guide is written primarily for facilitator trainers working in the context of community-wide programs, where large numbers of circles meet simultaneously across a city, town, or region.

A well developed training strategy and good facilitators are crucial for the success of these large-scale efforts in citizen engagement. We have developed this guide to help you in all aspects of building your training program.

Using this guide

Part 1 presents an agenda for a basic training program, as well as notes and exercises to help you carry out the training process. Adapt these ideas and exercises to suit the needs and goals of your program.

Part 2 covers the training content, arranged in sequence to match the agenda in Part 1. This material is presented so that it can be easily photocopied for handouts, or transferred to transparencies for overhead projection. You are welcome to reproduce this material to use in your training, giving SCRC proper credit.

Part 3 presents information on building and supporting an ongoing training program – including recruitment, skill building, advice on co-facilitation, training young people as facilitators, and other related information.

Part 4 provides suggestions for training other trainers of study circle facilitators.

Part 5 presents a variety of evaluation strategies to enhance the training and support of strong facilitators.

Finally, the guide includes a reference section and an appendix with further resources.

Contact the Study Circles Resource Center for help in putting this guide to use in your community.

THE BIG PICTURE 1

Laying the foundation

To have a dynamic study circle program, you not only need large numbers of study circles, you need large numbers of *well run* study circles. That means you need a strong capacity for recruiting and training facilitators, evaluating them, and supporting them on an ongoing basis.

Most study circle facilitators are volunteers – people who have basic skills and a real desire to make a contribution to their community. All communities have people who can become strong study circle facilitators and trainers of facilitators. When thinking about recruiting potential facilitators, look for people who have related skills. If there is a community college or university that offers courses in facilitation, conflict resolution, or mediation, their graduates would be an excellent source to tap. Corporations often employ in-house facilitators, and congregations are full of skilled people who lead discussions. Other groups to explore include educators, senior citizens, social workers, clergy, counselors, and professional mediators. Remember to tell your trainees that everyone will be trained, assessed, and evaluated as they go along. While many people do have the necessary skills, facilitation is not for everyone. And, there are many other jobs to fill in community-wide efforts. Volunteers are always welcome!

However they are recruited, good facilitators need sufficient training, plenty of practice, support, skill building, constructive feedback, and recognition. In large programs that are sustained over time, the facilitator pool is constantly replenished, as new people volunteer and others move on to take other roles in the program.

It is important to remember that the facilitator's primary responsibility is to manage the discussion. That's plenty! Don't overload the facilitator with responsibilities like recruiting participants or finding meeting sites. In large, community-wide programs, the bulk of the organizing effort belongs to the program coordinator and coalition members.

When building an ongoing training capacity, step back and think through your goals, your needs, and your community's assets. A strong training capacity is a critical link in a strong overall program.

Guidelines and principles for good trainings

Because study circles are participatory, interactive and experiential in nature, facilitator trainings should be too. The **demonstration study circle** (where participants can observe a skilled discussion leader in action) and the **practice session(s)** (in which everyone participates in a study circle, and has a chance to practice facilitating) are the heart of facilitator training. Above all, you want your participants to understand firsthand how a study circle works and the role the facilitator plays in making the study circle effective. Trainees will benefit most by internalizing the process; when they go on to facilitate study circles, experiential knowledge will be a much more reliable guide than any number of lectures or readings about how to lead discussions.

Here are some key principles to keep in mind when planning a study circle facilitator training:

- make the training interactive and experiential;
- model what you are teaching;
- emphasize practice and feedback;
- evaluate the training.

While the specifics of your training will depend on the goals of your particular study circles, there are general goals that apply to all study circle facilitator trainings. By the time people have completed the training, they should:

- understand what a study circle is;
- know about the study circle program they will be part of;
- understand that the facilitator is impartial;
- experience a study circle, both as a participant and a facilitator;
- practice the basic skills they need to facilitate a study circle.

An important way to achieve your goals – besides giving participants the chance to participate in and facilitate a study circle – is to model the role of a facilitator in everything you do. The entire training program, not just the practice study circle session, should be as participatory and interactive as possible. Participants should do most of the talking; turn questions back to them. The instructor should provide guidance and fill in the gaps with key points that participants do not mention.

The basic training program presented in this guide is designed to take six hours. A longer training session will give the participants more practice facilitating. If you have less than six hours, consult page 36 for suggestions for a shorter introductory orientation.

Training programs vary in the number of participants. If you need to train a large number of facilitators, work with one or two co-trainers who can take responsibility for certain sections of the event, and can provide interest and variety. Try to make sure that each *practice* study circle has at least 7, and no more than 12, participants. Plan to have an experienced "observer/debriefer" for each of the practice study circles to help give feedback.

Basic training agenda

This section outlines a basic training program of six hours. (Variations for both shorter and longer programs can be found in Part 3.) Adapt the training to your own style. It is designed to be flexible; you may want to adjust the timing or modify some sections. Be creative and make it your own; just be sure to preserve the key principles of study circles.

As you prepare for your training, keep in mind that you'll need some handouts for each participant, including: 1) copies of Part 2 of this training guide; 2) brief discussion materials and questions for the practice study circles; and 3) evaluation forms (see pages 49-62, especially page 55).

1. Welcome, introductions, and review of the agenda (20 minutes total)

(a) Welcome and introductions (15 minutes)

(b) Review of the training agenda (5 minutes)

2. Introduction to study circles (60 minutes total)

(a) What is a study circle? (10 minutes)

(b) What is a community-wide study circle program? (10 minutes)

(c) Overview of a typical study circle (10 minutes)

(d) Typical "round" of study circles (5 minutes)

(e) Active listening exercise (15 minutes)

(f) How do study circles differ from other groups? (10 minutes)

BREAK (15 minutes)

3. Demonstration study circle and debriefing (30 minutes)

4. The basics of study circle facilitation (45 minutes total)

(a) Skill-building exercise (20 minutes)

(b) Tips for effective discussion facilitation (10 minutes)

(c) Suggestions for dealing with typical challenges (10 minutes)

(d) Session-by-session outline for facilitators (5 minutes)

MEAL BREAK (45 minutes)

5. Practice study circle and debriefing (2 hours)

6. Final comments, training evaluation, and closing (15 minutes)

Annotated training agenda

The following annotated agenda contains notes about the process described in each section, as well as descriptions of the exercises.

❖ **1. Welcome, introductions, and review of the agenda (20 minutes total)**

(a) Welcome and introductions (15 minutes)

Before the training, write on a flip chart or blackboard the information you want participants to cover in their introductions. For example:

- Your name, where you are from, the nature of your work
- What do you know about study circles?
- Do you have any related facilitation experience?
- What do you hope to get out of this training?

Welcome the participants and introduce yourself to the group. Invite participants to introduce themselves in turn. Ask them to include in their introductions what they know already about study circles. This will provide you with important information about the level of knowledge you are working with. Also, the makeup of your group will let you tailor your presentation accordingly. For example, if you have mediators in the training, you might like to include a comparison of mediation and study circle facilitation.

The response to the question of what participants hope to gain from the training will clarify expectations and provide helpful information about participants' background and experience. Keep track of the responses so you can refer to them when you discuss the training agenda and goals. You may also want to add some kind of icebreaker exercise to start things off on a positive note.

If your training has more than 25 people, you will need to abbreviate this introductory section, since it will take so much time. Put people into small groups and give them a few minutes to get to know each other, or just ask for names and organizations.

(b) Review of the training agenda (5 minutes)

Go over the agenda to explain what is planned for the day, and compare it with participants' expectations. Include in this your goals for the training. At this point, you may wish to have someone from the sponsoring organization talk about the larger program of which these facilitators will be a part.

Ask for questions or comments on the agenda. Make sure participants feel that their expectations will be addressed, and give them a chance to modify the agenda, if necessary.

❖ **2. Introduction to study circles (60 minutes total)**

(a) What is a study circle? (10 minutes)

In this opening presentation, you will begin with the fundamentals: the characteristics of a study circle, and information on how study circles are being used in community settings as a tool for democratic discussion and problem solving. (See pages 14-15 for details.) A flip chart or overhead slides can help illustrate the basic points you are covering. Ask trainees for any questions they might have.

(b) What is a community-wide study circle program? (10 minutes)

This is the time to summarize the fundamentals of community-wide organizing, and point out how facilitation fits in to the overall program. (See pages 16-17 for details.)

(c) Overview of a typical study circle (10 minutes)

This presentation covers the components of a typical 2-hour study circle, and introduces the idea of a neutral facilitator. (See pages 18-20 for the complete information.)

(d) Typical "round" of study circles in a community-wide program (5 minutes)

Each round of study circles typically begins with a kickoff and ends with an action forum. (See page 21.)

(e) Active listening exercise (15 minutes)

Active listening exercise

Begin by explaining that this exercise will provide the opportunity to practice one of the main skills used in study circles: respectful, active listening.

Ask people to pair off with someone they do not know well. Explain that one person will talk for three uninterrupted minutes, in response to the posted questions, while the other person listens. The instructor will call "time" after three minutes, and the partners will reverse roles.

Explain that the task for each listener is to give full attention to the person talking. The listeners speak only to ask questions to understand better what is being said, not to give advice or express opinions. The listeners should demonstrate active listening either through body language or short phrases ("Uh huh," "I see," "Yes").

Following the exercise, talk about it with the full group. People who have never participated in such an exercise are often surprised to discover how challenging it can be to concentrate totally on another person, as well as how rewarding it is to be fully "heard" by their partner. Ask participants to reflect on what they have experienced:

- What are your main reactions to this exercise?
- What did you find difficult about either role?
- What did you like?
- What role did body language play? What about eye contact?
- What was it like to be really listened to?
- What was it like to focus completely on someone else's ideas, without thinking about how you would respond?

Close the exercise by telling participants that listening well is probably the most important skill an effective study circle facilitator and participant can master. ***It is this particular kind of active listening in a structured conversation that distinguishes study circles from other types of public discourse***. In large part, it is why study circles are so effective.

This exercise helps to establish connections in the group, gives people a hands-on experience, and orients trainees to the experiential nature of study circles. Post questions to use in the exercise that relate specifically to the issue you will be addressing in the program. Following are examples of questions that help people explore their own concerns and connect with the issue.

- Why are you concerned about this issue?
- How have your experiences or concerns affected your opinions about this issue?
- What would it mean to our community to have citizens really engaged on this issue?

(f) How do study circles differ from other groups? (10 minutes)

Here, you can further explain study circles by contrasting them with other kinds of groups, and by comparing different kinds of facilitation. (See page 22 for details.)

BREAK (15 minutes)

❖ **3. Demonstration study circle and debriefing (30 minutes)**

This part of the training allows you to demonstrate how a study circle works, and what good facilitation looks like. A good way to accomplish this is through a **"fishbowl"** exercise. (This fishbowl is an important training component for beginners. If your trainees are already experienced in group facilitation, you may be able to omit or shorten it.)

Fishbowl exercise

Ask for a few volunteers (6 to 8) and seat them in a circle with an experienced facilitator inside the "fishbowl." (You can facilitate this group, or have another skilled facilitator do it.) The other trainees can sit or stand around the small group to observe. The facilitator begins by welcoming everyone, initiating introductions and explaining the impartial role of the facilitator. The facilitator will help the group set its ground rules. Then the discussion begins and continues for several minutes. During the discussion, the facilitator should introduce some typical opening session questions such as personal concerns about the issue, and also some questions that help people consider different viewpoints on the issue (typical of later study circle sessions). During the fishbowl, the facilitator should demonstrate some paraphrasing, clarifying, summarizing, or other common facilitation techniques. Involve the entire group in debriefing the exercise, using the questions below.

Post these questions where everyone can see them in the debriefing demonstration and practice study circle sessions.

What did the facilitator do to:

- set a positive tone?
- explain and help the group set the ground rules?
- help people connect their concerns and values to the issue?
- manage the discussion process? For example, what interventions did he or she use? Were those techniques effective? Would another approach have been better?

- help advance the group's understanding of the content?
- make sure that a number of different views were considered?
- bring out some of the complexities of the issue?
- try to involve everyone in the discussion?
- help participants identify areas of general agreement?

❖ 4. The basics of study circle facilitation (45 minutes total)

In this part of the training, participants will practice some basic facilitation techniques and discuss the essence of successful discussion leadership.

(a) Skill-building exercise (20 minutes)

See supporting material found on page 23.

Skill-building exercise

In this part of the training, participants will concentrate on a few key facilitation skills – **reflecting**, **clarifying**, **summarizing**, and **shifting focus**. Break the group into pairs, with each team having a designated "speaker" and a "trainee." For each of the four skills, the practice will be the same. Begin by explaining and defining the first skill. Then, ask the "speaker" to talk for 3 minutes about a topic the trainer has assigned. (Note: Always try to use subject material in the exercise that is concrete and real, and relates to your study circle program issue.) The trainer calls time. The "trainee" responds, using the skill in question. Then the partners switch roles for the next three minutes.

For example, **shifting focus**. The trainer begins by saying, "Shifting focus means the facilitator intervenes in the conversation to change speakers or move on to a new topic. The speaker will speak for three minutes about how different races are treated in this community. Sometime during that time, the trainee will intervene and shift the focus. Then, switch roles." Move through all four skills in this way, allowing some time for the partners to debrief with each other. Note: you can vary this exercise by having the trainees work in triads, designating one person as an "observer." This will enhance the debriefing part of the exercise. Adjust your timing accordingly, to make sure everyone gets a turn.

(b) Tips for effective discussion facilitation (10 minutes)

(c) Suggestions for dealing with typical challenges (10 minutes)

(d) Session-by-session outline for facilitators (5 minutes)

This part (b-d) of the training can be conducted in small groups or one large group. Refer to the handouts on pages 24-31 to guide the discussion. If time permits, encourage an open question-and-answer period where participants have a chance to react to this material, share any concerns, and talk about other effective facilitation strategies that might be employed in study circles.

MEAL BREAK (45 minutes)

This can be a good opportunity for participants to look over the discussion materials they will be using in the practice.

❖ 5. Practice study circle and debriefing (2 hours)

This is the heart of the training. It provides a chance for everyone to participate in a study circle, and for trainees to have a chance at facilitating. If you have shortened or eliminated earlier parts of the training, add your extra time to the practice session. Remember, the more practice facilitators can have, the better prepared they will be. For this part of the training, participants will be working in groups of 7 to 10 people. During the practice, each person will have a chance to be a participant in the discussion of the issue, to observe the study circle process, and to be a group facilitator. Make plans to have someone with facilitation expertise act as an outside observer for each practice group.

Practice study circle exercise

Each practice group will need a timekeeper, someone to volunteer to be the first facilitator, and an outside observer. (Observers should be experienced facilitators who are helping with the training.) Ideally, everyone will have at least 10 minutes to act as the facilitator. This depends on how much time you have in the training and how many people are in each group. If time is limited and there are too many people, have some people facilitate for a longer time, explaining that not everyone will get a chance. Ideally, each person has several roles: taking a turn as the facilitator; being a fully engaged participant; watching how other group members are doing; and monitoring the overall process – a tall order! When the timekeeper indicates 10 minutes are up, another person takes a turn at facilitating, picking up the discussion where it is, and continuing.

Move through the discussion materials so that facilitators have practice facilitating a typical progression of study circle sessions: 1) participants concerns and connections with the issue (opening session); 2) weighing various views on the issue (middle session); 3) asking participants to consider ideas for action (last session). Let the group members know there will be time for feedback at the end, and they will all be able to offer insights to each other. There will also be feedback from the group's observer. Observers should sit outside the circle – to watch, listen, observe, and take detailed notes. The observer should refer to the questions used during the fishbowl (see page 8) to frame feedback for the various facilitators.

Remind the trainees that this is an artificial setting, but it will provide at least a taste of real study circle facilitation. (Trainees may wish to schedule additional practice sessions to build on the skills learned at the formal training.)

When the practice session is over, spend at least 30 minutes debriefing. All participants should first evaluate themselves, then hear comments from group members, and, finally, comments from the observer. Ask participants to be as positive as possible. It's best to point out the positive qualities in a leader's performance before identifying the areas to improve.

When this feedback is finished, reconvene the whole group.

❖ 6. Final comments, training evaluation, and closing (15 minutes)

You may want to ask sponsors of the community-wide program to talk about their plans, and give instructions to facilitators about the upcoming program, including next steps, further practice sessions, and ongoing facilitator support.

Close the training by asking the entire group to reflect on the day. You might use the following questions to help direct the final moments.

(1) What is something you learned or realized today that benefited you?

(2) Do you have any general comments or observations to offer?

A written evaluation of the training is often more helpful than an oral one, but both will give you insights to help shape future trainings. Be sure to save time to distribute a simple evaluation form (see page 55), and encourage your trainees to fill it out and give it to you before they leave.

Once again, thank participants for attending and for their contributions. Ask them to keep you posted on the progress of their study circles.

THE CONTENT OF YOUR TRAINING PROGRAM 2

On the following pages you will find comprehensive information about study circle theory, practice, and facilitation. This material constitutes the key information you will want to cover in your training. It can be easily duplicated to use as handouts for the trainees. (Handout materials are designated by the ⊹ symbol in the upper left hand corner.) If you will be using an overhead projector, simplify the language to a *few key points* for the transparencies, and then supplement with your handouts and explanation.

What is a study circle?

A study circle:

- is a process for small-group deliberation that is voluntary and participatory;
- is a small group, usually 8 to 12 participants;
- is led by a facilitator who is impartial, who helps manage the deliberation process, but is not an "expert" or "teacher" in the traditional sense;
- considers many perspectives, rather than advocating a particular point of view;
- uses ground rules to set the tone for a respectful, productive discussion;
- is rooted in dialogue and deliberation, not debate;
- has multiple sessions which move from personal experience of the issue, to considering multiple viewpoints, to strategies for action;
- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concern;
- provides an opportunity for citizens to work together to improve their community.

Background notes for "What is a study circle?"

Study circles are a simple and powerful process for democratic discussion and community problem solving. In these small-group, face-to-face settings, citizens address public concerns, bringing the wisdom of ordinary people to bear on complex issues. Cooperation and participation are stressed so that the group can capitalize on the experience of all its members. Study circles are voluntary and highly interactive, and give everyday people opportunities to express their voice in public life.

The study circle is small-group democracy in action; all viewpoints are taken seriously, and each participant has an equal opportunity to participate. The process – democratic discussion among equals – is as important as the content. Study circles seek "common ground;" but consensus or compromise is not necessary. Study circles provide a vehicle for citizens to work collectively to develop concrete action ideas to address community issues – action on an individual, small-group, institutional, and community level.

As an informal, practical, and effective method for adult learning and social change, the study circle came from the Chautauqua Assembly founded in New York in 1870. At that time, the study circle was a vehicle for providing higher education to people who didn't have access to college. Instead of formal classes, people would send for discussion materials, and then get together in small groups to discuss them. These study circles proved to be an effective, collaborative education method, where individuals learned from each other in a democratic manner.

During the 20th century, study circles became a common form of adult education in countries all over the world, from Scandinavia to Asia. In the U.S., however, study circles declined with the rise of colleges and universities.

American study circles have revived in recent years, but in a very different form. As public interest in small-group discussions and forums grew in the late 1980s, the Topsfield Foundation began to explore the role of citizen deliberation in public life and community problem solving. With the creation of the Study Circles Resource Center in 1989, small-group, participatory, democratic discussions known as study circles played an increasing role in civic activities across the country. This early work yielded the community-wide study circle program model which combined tested principles of citizen involvement: broad-based sponsoring coalitions and inclusive grass-roots recruitment. Community-wide study circle programs aim to involve large numbers of citizens working together to address public issues. Like their ancestors, these study circles are collaborative and educational. They are, in addition, cross-sector, nonpartisan efforts to engage people from all across a community in democratic dialogue and problem solving.

What is a community-wide study circle program?

A community-wide program:

- is organized by a coalition of community organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, the faith community, the media, local government, the United Way, the police department, the YWCA, the Urban League, and neighborhood associations.
- involves many study circles happening at the same time across a community.
- takes 3 to 6 months to organize.
- involves a significant portion of a community's population – 5 to 10% of the community is a frequent goal.
- begins with a large public kickoff, and ends with an action forum to give participants the opportunity to move to action.
- is labor intensive, rather than capital intensive.

Background notes for "What is a community-wide study circle program?"

Study circles have their greatest reach and impact when community organizations work together to create large-scale programs. These community-wide programs engage large numbers of citizens – in some cases thousands – in study circles on a public issue such as race relations, crime and violence, or education. Broad, cross-sector sponsoring coalitions create strong, diverse community participation. Participants in study circles have an opportunity to make an impact on an issue they care about.

Community-wide study circle programs are often organized in "rounds," with time allowed between the rounds for organizers to assess the program and regroup. In this way, the study circles can be sustained and ongoing in a community, reaching more and more people, and creating a critical mass of grass-roots energy and commitment for impact on an issue. Rounds usually begin with a large public kickoff event, heightening awareness and interest in the upcoming study circles, and drawing the community's attention to the issue. Following the kickoff, the study circles meet over several consecutive weeks all across the community. When they are complete, participants and the public at large are invited to an action forum or concluding event where everyone has a chance to hear about the program, learn what all the groups did, and form task forces to work on specific action ideas.

How do community-wide study circle programs come into being?

Typically, a single organization such as a mayor's office, a school board, or a Human Relations Commission initiates and staffs the project. In most communities, one organization takes the lead and approaches other key organizations to build a sponsoring coalition. Most community-wide programs have 10 to 30 organizations as sponsors or endorsers. Grass-roots organizations such as churches, neighborhood associations, businesses, schools, and clubs often take part. Usually, organizers run a "pilot" phase of a few study circles, to familiarize themselves with the process, try out the facilitators, and learn about the organizing details. They then go on to organize a large-scale program.

What are the outcomes of community-wide study circle programs?

By participating in study circles, citizens gain "ownership" of the issues, discover a connection between personal experiences and public policies, and gain a deeper understanding of their own and others' perspectives and concerns. They discover common ground and a greater desire and ability to work collaboratively to solve local problems – as individuals, as members of small groups, and as members of large organizations in the community. Community-wide study circle programs foster new connections among community members that lead to new levels of community action. They also create new connections between citizens and government, both at an institutional level and among community members.

If you would like to know where community-wide study circles are happening, or where study circle coalitions are forming, please contact the Study Circles Resource Center. A complete guide to organizing programs, *Planning Community-wide Study Circle Programs: A Step-by-Step Guide*, is available from SCRC. See also "Basic steps in creating a community-wide study circle program" (pages 71-73) in the appendix.

A typical study circle session

(usually 2 hours with adults; no more than 1.5 hours with young people)

- Welcome and introductions
- Ground rules
- Discussion
- Summary and common ground
- Evaluation

Background notes for "A typical study circle session"

1. Introductions, roles, and overview of the program. Give group members the opportunity to briefly introduce themselves. After you have welcomed them and introduced yourself, you may want to include a question about what drew them to this study circle. Take a moment at the beginning to explain your role as the *neutral facilitator* who is there to help the discussion stay focused. You are there to serve the group in its deliberations. This means that you will not participate in the discussion by adding your opinion, but rather will concentrate on the group's discussion process. You might say something like, "My role is to keep discussion focused and moving along. Your role is to share your concerns and beliefs and to listen carefully to others." Also, in your opening remarks give members an overview of the larger study circle effort, how many groups are meeting, the goals of the program, who the organizers are, and information about what will happen at the end of the multiple sessions – such as an action forum or concluding event.

2. Ground rules. In the first session, you will help the group establish their own ground rules for how they want their group to behave together. You might begin by offering one or two suggestions to get them started; then ask members to add their own ideas. (See page 34 for some sample ground rules that are tried and true.) Be sure to cover how the group will handle conflict and disagreement, as well as confidentiality. Post the ground rules where everyone can see them, and remind your group that they can add more to the list as the weeks go on, should situations arise. This is a *very important* step for the group, and will help everyone manage the deliberations, even if they become difficult. If public officials join your group, take some extra time to revisit the ground rules and consider adding some others to encourage give and take, curb complaints, and handle the media.

3. Discussion of the topic/issue. Depending on the session, this part of the study circle can take many forms. In the opening session, you might begin by asking, "Why are you so concerned about this issue?" or "How has your experience influenced the way you feel about this issue?"

In later sessions, the facilitator will help the group explore many sides of the issue. You can help them to expand the dialogue by asking them to consider the strengths and weaknesses of all viewpoints. You may wish to have group members read the points of view aloud. Ask participants to make a case for a viewpoint they disagree with, or take a position that hasn't been represented. Use open-ended questions to help members examine the complexities of the issue.

Remember that consideration of the issue is the centerpiece of each study circle session. It is important that you monitor carefully how the discussion is going. Is it time for a clarifying question or a summary of key points? Are all members fully engaged, or are some people dominating? Is the discussion wandering and calling for refocusing?

In the final session, the discussion will include helping participants think about action – what are we going to do about this issue in this community? This can be done by reviewing common themes from earlier sessions; generating ideas for possible actions to be taken by individuals, group members, or large numbers of people; helping people prioritize their ideas; and planning for an action forum.

4. Summary and common ground. Ask participants to summarize the most important results of their discussion. "Did any common concerns emerge?" "In what ways do you see the issue differently as a result of considering others' views?" Participants will likely have some common concerns and

goals even though they have different ideas about how to address or achieve them. Summarizing like this will give participants a shared sense of progress and purpose.

5. Evaluation and next steps. In the final minutes, ask participants for their thoughts on the experience. What did they like or not like about the discussion? How well did the ground rules work? What, if anything, would they like to change? How do they feel about the group facilitation? These questions will provide an overall sense of how things are going.

If the group will be meeting again, remind them what materials or questions should be reviewed for next time. If this is the final session, thank everyone. You may want to take a few minutes to ask participants to fill out an evaluation form. Also, remind participants of upcoming events, such as an action forum or concluding event. Be sure to let everyone know how they can continue to be involved.

Typical "round" of study circles in a community-wide program

Kickoff

A large public meeting designed to call attention to the program and encourage participation.

Many study circles begin at the same time across the community, each meeting several times. The sessions usually follow this format:

Session 1: How does this issue touch me personally?

Session 2: What is the nature of the problem? (a range of views)

Session 3: What are some approaches for addressing this problem? (a range of views)

Session 4: What are we going to do about this issue in our community? (moving to action)

Action Forum

A large public meeting where study circle participants and other community members come together to celebrate, to hear about the deliberations, and have the opportunity to move on to action strategies.

What study circles are, and are not: A comparison

A study circle IS:

- **a small-group discussion** involving deliberation and problem solving, in which an issue is examined from many perspectives; it is enriched by the members' knowledge and experience, and often informed by expert information and discussion materials; it is aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

A study circle is NOT the same as:

- **conflict resolution**, a set of principles and techniques used in resolving conflict between individuals or groups. (Study circle facilitators and participants sometimes use these techniques in study circles.)
- **mediation**, a process used to settle disputes that relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement. (Mediators often make excellent study circle facilitators, and have many skills in common.)
- **a focus group**, a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Respondents (who are sometimes paid) are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.
- **traditional education with teachers and pupils**, where the teacher or an expert imparts knowledge to the students.
- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome**, such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. A study circle begins with a shared interest among its members, and unfolds as the process progresses.
- **a town meeting**, a large-group meeting which is held to get public input on an issue, or to make a decision on a community policy.
- **a public hearing**, a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

Key facilitation skills

- **Reflecting** – feeding back the content and feeling of the message.

  "Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly..."

- **Clarifying** – restating an idea or thought to make it more clear.

  "What I believe you are saying is..."

- **Summarizing** – stating concisely the main thoughts.

  "It sounds to me as if we have been talking about a few major themes..."

- **Shifting focus** – moving from one speaker or topic to another.

  "Thank you, John. Do you have anything to add, Jane?"

  "We've been focusing on views 1 and 2. Does anyone have strong feelings about the other views?"

- **Using silence** – allowing time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.

- **Using non-verbal and verbal signals** – combining body language and speech to communicate – for example, using eye contact to encourage or discourage behaviors in the group. Be aware of cultural differences.

  Neutrality is important here, so that we don't encourage some people more than others.

Good study circle facilitators

- are neutral; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.
- help the group set its ground rules, and keep to them.
- help group members grapple with the content by asking probing questions.
- help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.
- create opportunities for everyone to participate.
- focus and help to clarify the discussion.
- summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.

And

- are self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.
- are able to put the group first.
- have a passion for group process with its never-ending variety.
- appreciate all kinds of people.
- are committed to democratic principles.

Background notes for "Good study circle facilitators"

Study circles require a facilitator who can help focus and structure the discussion and, at the same time, encourage group ownership. The facilitator's main task is to create an atmosphere for democratic deliberation, one in which each participant feels at ease in expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The study circle facilitator does not "teach" but instead is there to guide the group's process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed, but must know enough about it to be able to ask probing questions and raise views that have not been considered by the group.

***Above all*, staying neutral and helping the group to do its own work are central to good study circle facilitation.** This takes practice and attention to one's own behaviors. Make sure to ask for the group's help in making this work well for everyone.

The importance of neutrality*

- Act as if you are neutral; ***practice*** neutrality.
- Encourage and affirm each person.
- Explain your role.
- Be aware of your own "unconscious" behaviors.
- Resist the temptation to step out of the role of facilitator.

*Thanks to the RKI ***Facilitators' Working Guide***; see reference section.

Tips for effective discussion facilitation

Be prepared.

The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the discussion materials, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help further the discussion.

Set a relaxed and open tone.

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.

Establish clear ground rules.

At the beginning of the study circle, help the group establish its own ground rules by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. Here are some ground rules that are tried and true:

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Share "air time."
- Conflict is not personalized. Don't label, stereotype, or call people names.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- What is said in this group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that.

Monitor and assist the group process.

- Keep track of how the group members are participating – who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.
- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.
- When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.
- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.
- Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.
- Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- Remember: a study circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

Tips for effective discussion facilitation (continued)

Help the group grapple with the content.

- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.
- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.
- Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.
- Help participants to identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

Use probing comments and open-ended questions which don't lead to yes or no answers. This will result in a more productive discussion. Some useful questions include:

- What seems to be the key point here?
- What is the crux of your disagreement?
- What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?
- Please give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?
- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?
- What information supports that point of view?

Reserve adequate time for closing the discussion.

- Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.
- Thank everyone for their contributions.
- Provide some time for the group to evaluate the study circle process.

Suggestions for dealing with typical challenges

Most study circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that study circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

Problem:
Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a study circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the study circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

Problem:
An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.

Possible responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you ***must*** intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate; "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say." Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice – you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

Problem:
Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Suggestions for dealing with typical challenges (continued)

Problem:
Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Problem:
Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible responses: This rarely happens in study circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?"

Problem:
Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a study circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and that encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

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Session-by-session outline for facilitators

Many facilitators find it useful to have a "road map" of the major parts of each two-hour session.

Opening session:

- Introductions
- Roles of facilitator and participants
- Overview of program
- Ground rules
- Discussion questions/Case studies
- Summary
- Debriefing the session

Middle Sessions:

- Welcome and review
- Revisit the ground rules
- Points of view
- Summary
- Debriefing the session and pointers for next time

Final Session:

- Review themes
- Review any action ideas already mentioned
- Brainstorm action ideas for individuals, groups, and the community
- Prioritize and plan for action forum or next steps
- Final thoughts, and THANK YOU to group members for their participation!

The role of the participant

The following points are intended to help you, the participant, make the most of your study circle experience, and to suggest ways in which you can help the group.

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.
- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.
- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.
- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.
- **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.
- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.
- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.
- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.
- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

A comparison of dialogue and debate

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.	Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.	In debate, winning is the goal.
In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.	In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.
Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.	Debate defends assumptions as truth.
Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.	Debate causes critique of the other position.
Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.	Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.	Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.	In debate, one searches for glaring differences.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.	In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.	Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.	Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate implies a conclusion.

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo-Smith, Lally Stowell, and Gene Thompson. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (617)492-1764.

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Sample ground rules

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Share "air time."
- If you are offended, say so; and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't personalize it; stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- One person speaks at a time.
- What is said in the group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that.

RELATED TIPS AND INFORMATION 3

On the following pages you will find related information to help round out your overall facilitator training program.

Expanding the basic training program

If you have time for a training session that goes beyond six hours, increase the time for the practice study circle. This gives each participant more time to facilitate, and provides a more realistic study circle experience for all. Be sure to build in plenty of breaks and time to thoroughly debrief the facilitation.

Condensing the basic training program

Although 3 to 4 hours is not long enough to fully train study circle leaders, it is long enough to familiarize people with the process. You can use this time to introduce and orient your trainees to study circles. Include in such a meeting the basics of study circle theory, facilitation and organizing, and a mock session. Here is a suggested schedule for a study circle orientation:

Welcome and introductions (15 minutes)

Introduction to study circles (45 minutes)

Active listening exercise (15 minutes)

What is a study circle? (30 minutes)

Skills for effective study circle leadership (30 minutes)

Participating in a mock study circle and debriefing (1 hour)

Community-wide study circle programs (20 minutes)

Final questions and closing (10 minutes)

Training young people as facilitators

In study circles in which most or many of the participants are young people, the best results come when the groups are facilitated by the young people themselves. These youth facilitators may work alone, or in teams, perhaps paired with an adult. Whatever the arrangement, study circles with youth facilitators will provide a rich experience for facilitator and participant alike. Young facilitators are powerful symbols of youth as leaders. They are learning – and modeling for their peers – a collaborative, respectful, and democratic kind of leadership. They are also a reminder that the study circle "belongs" to the young people, and will help to ensure that any adults in the group do not dominate it. It is effective to have a young person act as the lead facilitator, with an experienced adult as a backup or co-facilitator, especially if there are only a few adults present in the circle.

When training young people as study circle facilitators, the same principles and basic agenda used with adults applies, but with some modifications. First, spend more time on exercises to help "break the ice" at the beginning of the training, especially if the group has participants who don't know each other. Also, as a general rule, make the presentation sections of your training shorter, and build in time for participants to work in small groups and reflect on the theory. Or, give the

small groups questions to answer that help them think about how this role as facilitator is different from how they function in school or in other parts of their lives. If time allows, set aside some quiet time for reflection or "journaling," where the young people can think about how these techniques can be used in many settings. Don't forget to have plenty of food – pizza, of course – and, above all, make the training fun and creative.

Co-facilitation

Co-facilitation can be an effective way to support new facilitators, by helping them gain confidence and experience through partnering with a seasoned person. Many communities decide to make co-facilitation their standard practice because it has so many advantages:

- Co-facilitation provides new opportunities to build bridges in a community.
- Co-facilitators share responsibility and take turns being the lead facilitator.
- Co-facilitators can work together to plan the discussion and debrief.
- There are two different people to watch the group dynamics and compare notes.
- Experienced leaders can help new leaders develop their skills.
- The co-facilitators may have complementary skills. For example, one might be fairly quiet and an excellent listener, while the other might be good at asking thought-provoking questions.
- The co-leaders can come from different demographic groups. For example, the co-leaders could be a man and a woman, a white person and a person of color, a parent and a student, a Christian and a Jew, etc. This provides balance and fairness, and helps the group members know that everyone is important to the discussions.

Ongoing training and support for facilitators

It is crucial to assess facilitators' skills, provide further training, and offer continued support for these key people in your study circle program. A complete training program includes support and feedback mechanisms, assessment, and the means for continuous improvement.

First, during the training you will have an excellent chance to observe how your trainees are doing. In the practice, you can see them in action, and watch their ability to interact, reflect and guide their groups. Be sure you take detailed notes on each person, so that you can offer specific feedback during the training. Watch for successful interventions, good clarifying or summarizing techniques, and an inviting and comfortable tone. Always ask trainees to critique themselves first, then hear from the other participants, and finally offer your suggestions. If a difficult situation has occurred during the practice, ask for suggestions or offer alternative approaches.

Some new facilitators request more practice time before they try the "real thing." Other practice sessions can be easily arranged, and provide more opportunity for extended sessions. This can also be a training ground for co-facilitators to try working together. In some cases, new facilitators might request further skill-building exercises to handle a variety of group situations.

Once the program is underway, bring your facilitators together at least once during the sessions to share experiences, questions and strategies. This is helpful to everyone, and allows you to be in close touch with the process. (See page 56 for guidance.) Also make sure there is someone available throughout the program to brainstorm when questions or problems arise.

Finally, be sure you ask participants to evaluate the group facilitation they witness and experience. Share that feedback with the facilitator and work with him or her in the areas needing improvement. Be prepared for the rare situation when you have a trainee who is ill-suited to being a facilitator. You might need to ask this person to consider helping out with another aspect of the program. If you are monitoring the quality of your volunteer facilitator pool, then you must decide the criteria against which you measure your facilitators. People have many different facilitation styles, but should be true to fundamental principles of study circles, or the program could be damaged. The two most critical benchmarks by which to measure a facilitator are 1) neutrality (not sharing his or her own opinion), and 2) helping the group do its own work (not dominating or controlling the discussion).

Recording

There is often the need or desire to create a record of the study circle deliberations. This serves many purposes: it helps group members stay on track and move the discussion along; it provides a means of capturing the wisdom and common themes that are often identified in the deliberations; it can be turned into a comprehensive report which collects and synthesizes the discussions of many groups in a large program.

Recording can be accomplished in many ways. The facilitator can ask for a volunteer; a co-facilitator can also serve as a recorder; or an outside observer can play this role. Recording can be done on a tablet, blackboard, or flip chart. Whatever the means, there are a few key points to keep in mind. The record need not be a detailed account of everything; it can be a summary of key points, themes, and action ideas. Some groups organize their records by "Areas of agreement," "Areas of disagreement," and "Areas of ambiguity." However the notes are taken, the most important consideration is that they truly reflect the discussion. Try to use the words that speakers use, rather than paraphrasing. *Always check back with the group to see if participants feel that the record truly captures the essence of their thoughts.* And remember not to let the recording detract from the discussion – people should be talking to each other, not to the flip chart!

Practical nuts and bolts for good trainings

Here are some practical considerations for successful study circle training programs:

Where? Location

When planning your training, begin by finding a good physical space. Consider such things as safety, good light, good acoustics, comfortable chairs, access to a kitchen, plenty of parking, easy accessibility, heat and/or air conditioning. You will also need enough space, including breakout rooms, to handle your practice groups. We all know the wrong space can be deadly and will ruin even the best training. Plan on arriving in plenty of time to check things out, set up your materials, put on the

coffee, and generally prepare. Churches, community centers, vocational or community colleges, corporate board rooms, schools, city halls, and senior citizen centers all make good training locations.

When? Timing

If you are training as part of a large community-wide program, your trainings will need to be coordinated with the overall timetable of the organizers. If you are providing a generic training, or ongoing, regular facilitator trainings, the timing is less crucial. In some cases, weekday sessions are best for potential trainees, and in other communities, all training events are held on Saturdays. The best idea is to hold several training events, and to schedule them at different times to accommodate the largest number of people. Avoid the holidays and days of religious observance, and remember to check school vacation times. Many communities plan and train study circle facilitators in the summer, since the circles are more likely to be held in the fall and winter.

What? Tools of the trade

To help your training be better organized and more effective, you may wish to use supporting tools. Illustrate your key points using an overhead projector or a flip chart. Make sure the information is clearly visible to everyone in the room. If you are using a flip chart and markers, remember to use strong, deep-colored markers, with lighter colors as highlights only. Print legibly and big enough to be read in the back of the room! Have name tags ready for your trainees, to help them know each other, and to help you call them by name. If you are using a VCR, be sure to check out the equipment and cue up your tape ahead of time. And don't forget your handouts to reinforce the key points.

How? Formats and arrangements

When planning your training, you will need to consider how many people you can handle well. What will the space allow? How many practice groups will there be? A good rule of thumb is a ratio of about 20 to 25 people per trainer. As your numbers go up, you will need to have other trainers and enough observers to cover each of the practice groups. Also, consider your room arrangements. Whenever possible, try to avoid seating people with their backs to one another, as in theater style. Arranging trainees in a horseshoe or "U" shape works very well to promote good sight lines, easy interaction, and a comfortable place for the trainer at the front. Remember, you are training in the style of a study circle, so keep it consistent with the model whenever possible.

TRAINING OF TRAINERS 4

If you find yourself part of a large and continuing study circle effort, or if there seems to be a growing need for facilitator trainers in your area, you might consider developing a pool of potential trainers to share the load.

The ideal progression of experience is (1) to participate in a study circle; (2) to facilitate; (3) to train others to facilitate; and (4) to train other trainers. Some programs which have been underway for several years are now moving to develop several competent trainers in a geographic area to provide ongoing support.

If your potential trainers have gone through the steps indicated above, you will not need to spend any significant time on study circle theory or the specifics of facilitation training. Instead you can concentrate on the principles and guidelines behind good trainings.

Following is a basic agenda for a training of trainers event. It assumes a high level of familiarity with study circles and study circle facilitation. Adapt this to suit your program's needs, and add or subtract ideas as you need to.

Training of trainers agenda

1. **Welcome, introductions, and reviewing the agenda (20-30 minutes)**
   - (a) Your name and your organization
   - (b) Your exposure to study circles
   - (c) Your other training experience
2. **Overview of Training Principles (20-30 minutes)**
   - (a) Three basic components
   - (b) Guiding principles
3. **Small-group exercise: A look within (10 minutes)**
4. **Training basics (45-60 minutes)**
   - (a) Basic agenda, expanded and condensed
   - (b) Who makes good facilitators and how to find them
   - (c) Logistics – settings, timing, and tools of the trade
   - (d) Training young people
   - (e) Evaluation, feedback, skill building, and ongoing support

BREAK

5. **Small-group exercise: How can I make this happen in my community? (30-45 minutes)**
6. **Final comments and evaluation (15 minutes)**

On the following pages you will find material ready to photocopy or turn into transparencies for overhead projection. This information will assist in the training of trainers, along with the information already presented in Part 2.

Good trainings include:

- presentation
- demonstration
- interaction
- practice
- feedback
- evaluation
- and FUN!

Three major components of a successful training

As a trainer, you should:

- be open, honest, and caring.
- be committed to the process.
- practice what you teach – facilitate and participate.
- constantly evaluate and try new ideas.
- assume the best about your trainees.
- appreciate the many kinds of people and learning styles.
- know your own hot spots and how to handle them.

The content should include:

- a grounding in study circle theory and practice.
- a comparison of study circles to other small-group models.
- the community-wide study circle model.
- information about how study circles build community and democracy.
- the role of the facilitator.
- how to create useful practice opportunities.
- how to evaluate and give feedback.

The participants should be:

- interested in group process.
- ready for training.

Training principles

- Model what you are teaching.
- Emphasize interaction in the training.
- Focus on practice and feedback to trainees.
- Encourage trainees to ***experience*** a study circle as a participant before they try to facilitate one.

Small-group exercise: A look within

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- What draws me to this work?
- What skills do I bring to the task?
- What are my biggest challenges?
- What do I need to work on?

Small-group exercise: How can I make this happen in my community?

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- What are the facilitator needs for our program?
- How many people are already trained?
- Who else would be a good trainer?
- Where can we find potential facilitators?
- How will we recruit them?
- How will young people be involved?
- Are our facilitators diverse in age, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender?
- What is the timetable?
- Are we building a pool of volunteer facilitators?
- How will we nurture and support them?
- How will we evaluate?
- How are we connected to other study circle efforts in the community?

EVALUATION: HOW ARE THINGS GOING? 5

Evaluation is a key part of the overall plan to train and support facilitators. Evaluating the facilitation component of your program can help you:

- learn what is and isn't working well.
- monitor how the facilitators are doing and respond to their needs.
- come up with new strategies to improve your program.
- explore the impact of the study circle process on the facilitators.

A good evaluation should promote practical learning. It should apply fair and appropriate measures. And it should generate information that will be useful to the people who are working to make the program stronger.

This guide presents a range of evaluation tools that will help you collect information about the process of recruiting and training facilitators, the quality of the facilitation, and the facilitators' experiences. But "one size does not fit all." That's why it is important to tailor the evaluation to fit your program.

Please note that the sample forms we provide in this section can also be used in conjunction with those in SCRC's *Planning Community-wide Study Circle Programs: A Step-by-Step Guide*. We encourage you to partner with members of your program's coalition, steering committee, or working group to plan and administer the evaluation, and to analyze and report the results.

Sharing ownership of the evaluation

When you and your partners are committed to learning together, your collaboration will make your program stronger. As you prepare and implement your evaluation plan, do what you can to advance a sense of shared ownership of the evaluation process. Trainers, organizers, facilitators, and participants all have a part to play in ensuring that the study circle process goes well. There are many possible strategies for creating that sense of ownership and shared benefit. Here are a few suggestions:

- Involve your facilitators in the process of setting up the evaluation. The goal of the recruiters and trainers is to make sure that facilitators gain proficiency in study circle techniques, and that they learn to apply the principles presented in this guide. At the training, engage both facilitators and trainers in a discussion of evaluation. For starters, ask the group a simple question: "How would you know if a study circle facilitator has done a good job?" Urge them to be as specific as possible! (You are likely to find that both trainers and facilitators set high standards.)
- Then, describe your plans, share the forms included in this manual, and invite feedback.
- Next, listen and respond to their concerns and ideas for this evaluation.
- Let facilitators and participants know how you plan to report the results. This is an important factor that will influence how people feel about the evaluation process and how much they value the feedback they receive. Emphasize the ways in which the information will be beneficial to them and to the program as a whole.

When facilitators feel a sense of ownership of the evaluation, they are more likely to see the evaluation as an expression of your commitment to them. As a result, they are more likely to do their part to gather and provide information, and appreciate constructive feedback.

Finding partners in your community

There are many people in your community with the skills to help you put an evaluation plan into practice, to collect and organize information, to interpret data, and to develop strategies for reporting. Where might you look?

(1) Check with your program organizers to see which coalition members or sponsoring organizations can contribute expertise and staff time to the evaluation.

(2) Inquire at a local college or university to find out if a faculty member can help, or find a graduate student who would be interested in coordinating a study circle evaluation as part of a thesis or dissertation.

(3) Enlist the services of an independent researcher. In a growing number of study circle programs, research firms are offering their services pro bono, as a contribution to the community program.

(4) Ask community members to help you by administering and collecting forms, doing data entry, and working on newsletters that report the results.

(5) Recruit people with computer skills to help meet your information management needs.

(6) Consider asking your more advanced facilitators to serve as peer reviewers and mentors for newly trained facilitators. They can help by observing new facilitators in action, or by going over the evaluation results with first-time facilitators.

How can SCRC help?

With plenty of lead time, SCRC staff can help with conceptualizing and reviewing your evaluation strategy, and even with developing tools and analyzing data. We can also keep you informed of what's happening with other study circle programs, and help put you in touch with other evaluators who are doing original research.

We do ask that you keep in touch with us as you develop and implement your evaluation and that you share the results with us. Please send us copies of your evaluation reports. Our staff will review the results and suggest strategies for strengthening your program.

Tailoring the evaluation

As you think about how best to evaluate your study circle program's facilitation component, feel free to pick and choose among the forms presented in this manual. Choose the ones that seem most appropriate for your information needs.

If time allows, or if you're working with an independent evaluator, you may decide to develop your own research design and original evaluation tools. Evaluators of study circle programs should feel free to adapt the forms in this guide. (Please send SCRC copies of the tools you develop.)

The most important thing is to find a strategy that works for you. And remember to leave room to grow as your study circle program develops!

Sample forms in this guide

Facilitator profile 53
Designed to gather basic information about new facilitators (demographics, experience, and contact information) before they attend a facilitator training.

Training evaluation 55
Designed for use at a facilitator training.

"Checking in" with the facilitators 56
Presents a range of questions to guide a focused conversation with a small group of facilitators. This conversation should take place *after the second or third study circle session.* (If you can arrange another meeting, this can also be repeated after the last study circle session to give you a sense of how much the facilitators are learning and to explore the effects of the study circles on facilitators.)

Performance appraisal for study circle facilitators 57
Designed for facilitators to provide feedback at the end of the program.

Facilitator evaluation for study circle participants 59
Designed for participants to fill out at the last session of their group's study circle meetings. This form includes key questions about facilitation, which can be incorporated into a questionnaire that also asks about other components of the program.

Reporting back to SCRC 61
Provides a way to keep us up to date on your work. Ask program organizers to complete this form at the conclusion of a round of study circles.

Other useful strategies

Facilitator diaries furnish a log of facilitator's activities and experiences. Provide some key questions that you'd like them to reflect on after each session.

Observers are especially valuable when it comes to monitoring the quality of facilitation and offering constructive feedback to new facilitators. (Consider converting the ***Facilitator evaluation for study circle participants*** into a checklist for observers.)

One-on-one interviews with facilitators allow for in-depth discussions about a set of key questions. These can be time-consuming, but they can also provide a rich level of detail and insight.

Facilitator profile

Thank you for answering the questions that follow. Please be sure to respond to the questions on both sides of the page. Your responses will be used by program organizers to match you with a group or with a co-facilitator.

Part 1: Your background

1. Do you have experience in small-group facilitation, or is this your first experience?

- ❑ I have experience in small-group facilitation.
- ❑ This will be my first experience in small-group facilitation.

2. Please tell us about the skills and training that you bring to study circle facilitation.

3. Are you male or female?

- ❑ male
- ❑ female

4. How old are you?

- ❑ 12-17
- ❑ 18-29
- ❑ 30-39
- ❑ 40-49
- ❑ 50-64
- ❑ 65 and over

5. What is the last year of school you completed?

- ❑ less than high school
- ❑ some high school
- ❑ high school graduate
- ❑ some college
- ❑ college graduate
- ❑ postgraduate work or certification
- ❑ advanced degree

6. What is your occupation?

7. Are you ...

- ❑ African American/Black?
- ❑ Asian American?
- ❑ Hispanic/Latino?
- ❑ Mixed race?
- ❑ Native American/Indian?
- ❑ White/Caucasian?
- ❑ Other? **(Specify)**

_____

8. How did you become involved in this program as a facilitator?

9. Do you possess special knowledge or expertise about a particular issue or issue area? (Check all that apply.)

- ❑ community visioning
- ❑ crime/violence
- ❑ diversity issues
- ❑ education [adult/training/continuing education]
- ❑ health care
- ❑ education [children/youth]
- ❑ immigration
- ❑ religion
- ❑ substance abuse
- ❑ welfare reform
- ❑ youth and children's issues
- ❑ race relations/racism
- ❑ Others: **(Specify)**

_____

Over ▶▶▶

Part 2: Contact and scheduling information

Please provide the following information:

Name of the person who recruited you: _____

Your name: _____

Your address: _____

Your telephone number: _____

Your fax number: _____

Your e-mail address: _____

Proposed training sessions are listed below. **Check your 1st and 2nd choices.**

Date	*Day of the week*	*Time (note A.M. or P.M.)*	**1st choice**	**2nd choice**

All training sessions will be held at [*location*] _____. After we sort out people's choices for dates and times, you'll receive a postcard confirming your reservation for a training session. If you have any questions or need additional information for the training sessions or registration, please contact [*name*] _____ at [*telephone number*] _____.

Part 3: Facilitator pledge

Responsibilities of study circle facilitators include:

- ✔ making a firm commitment to facilitate discussions for each session of the study circle.
- ✔ attending at least one of the training sessions for study circle facilitators.
- ✔ working with the organizer who recruited you to establish mutually acceptable dates and times for your sessions.
- ✔ helping study circle participants engage in lively, focused discussions.
- ✔ remaining neutral during those discussions.
- ✔ preparing for the discussion by reviewing the discussion materials and the tips for facilitators.
- ✔ providing feedback to organizers and assisting with administering evaluation forms.

I understand the responsibilities of a study circle facilitator and agree to take on the role.

_____ _____

Your signature Date

Return to: _____

_____

_____

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Study circle facilitator training evaluation

1. Was participating in this study circle training valuable to you? (Circle one point on the continuum.)

0.....1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7

generally a waste of time — *an extremely valuable experience*

2. Did the training meet your specific expectations?

❑ yes

❑ no

Please explain:

3. Before today's training, had you ever participated in a study circle?

❑ yes ❑ no

4. How well do you understand the ideas behind study circles?

❑ very well ❑ fairly well ❑ not well at all

5. Do you feel ready to be assigned to a study circle, or not?

❑ Ready! I can't wait to get started.

❑ I feel more ready to organize than I do to facilitate.

❑ I feel more ready to facilitate than I do to organize.

❑ I need to practice, but I'll be ready soon.

❑ No, I do not feel ready to start facilitating study circle.

Reason:

6. What was the most rewarding part of this training? Why?

7. What was the most frustrating part of this training? Why?

8. What would you like to see the trainers do <u>the same way</u> next time? Why?

9. What, if anything, would you like the see the trainers do <u>differently</u> next time? Why?

10. Other comments:

Your name: (optional)

_____

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"Checking in" with the facilitators

It is important to get feedback from facilitators midway through a study circle – that is, after the second or third session, while the study circles are still in progress. There are a number of ways to do this. The questions listed below form an outline for an informal, focused conversation with a small group of facilitators. This approach has two main advantages. First, it provides facilitators with an opportunity to share their experiences, and to listen and learn from each other. Second, for the trainers or program organizers (whoever is responsible for "quality control"), this kind of focused conversation gives you a chance to monitor the progress of your facilitators, hear more about their needs, and identify any problem areas. It also provides a chance to learn more about the kinds of effects the study circle program is having on the facilitators.

Pointers:

- Keep the group small. Six to ten people is the ideal size.
- Find a neutral moderator, preferably not someone from your program staff.
- Find another neutral person to take notes or record the answers facilitators give to your questions.
- Before you start the conversation, explain how you will use the comments facilitators are about to share about their experiences.
- Afterwards, talk with the moderator and the program staff about what the group members said. If you do a write-up of the conversation, do not connect people's names with specific comments. If possible, make the write-up available to the facilitators who took part in the group, and let them know how you're responding to what they told you.

For help, see Richard A. Kruger and Jean A. King's *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups*. Focus Group Kit #5. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1988. <order@sagepub.com>

Questions — *These questions are a starting point for trainers to use in informal, focused conversations with facilitators.*

1. Tell about your experiences as a study circle facilitator. How are things going?

2. In your facilitation of the discussions, what are you most proud of?

3. What techniques or questions work best for you?

4. a) What situations do you find the most challenging? [You might want to prompt a response with one or more examples: "Is staying neutral a challenge for you? Dealing with a domineering person? Involving a shy person? Getting beyond the 'too much niceness' stage?"]
   b) Please give a specific example of a difficult or frustrating situation that came up in your group. What happened, and what did you do to address the situation? What would you do differently next time?

5. How is the group handling conflict when it arises?

6. Are there ways we could better support you?

7. Is there anything we missed that you'd like us to know about?

Performance appraisal for study circle facilitators

Please be sure to respond to the questions on both sides of the page.

Group name: _____

Location/site of your study circle _____

1. When did your study circle meet?
   _____ day _____ time

2. How many times did your study circle meet?
   _____

3. Generally speaking, how satisfied have you been with your experience as a study circle facilitator?
   - ❑ very satisfied
   - ❑ somewhat satisfied
   - ❑ not at all satisfied

   Why?

4. What was your most satisfying experience as a facilitator? Please provide an example:

5. What was your most frustrating experience as a study circle facilitator? Please provide an example:

6. In all, how many people participated in your study circle? (Count everyone who attended at least one session.) _____
   - 6a) How many people started with the first session? _____
   - 6b) How many of those people attended all the sessions? _____
   - 6c) How many people attended only one or two sessions? _____

7. How satisfied were your participants with the study circle process?
   - ❑ Most participants seemed satisfied.
   - ❑ Most participants expressed dissatisfaction.
   - ❑ Most participants expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction at various points in the process.
   - ❑ I couldn't judge their levels of satisfaction.

   Please explain:

8. Did you have adequate support from the program organizers, or not?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No
   - ❑ Not sure

   Please explain:

Over ▶▶▶

9. What additional support would have been helpful?

10. If you were to facilitate another study circle, what, if anything, would you change about your performance?

11. If you were to facilitate another study circle, what situational factors would you change (for example — discussion materials, overall organization of project, meeting site, etc.)?

12. What difference has taking part in this study circle program made in you personally?

13. What difference do you see this study circle program making in the community?

14. Other impressions, concerns, and comments:

55

Your name: (optional)

_____

Facilitator evaluation for study circle participants

For each item, simply check the box next to the response option you select. Thank you!

Group name: _____

Location/site of your study circle _____

1. Did your group have...

❑ one adult facilitator ❑ a team of facilitators ❑ one youth facilitator

2. What did you like best about the way your facilitator(s) led your study circle?

3. What do you think your facilitator(s) should do differently next time?

4 . Do you *agree* or *disagree* with the following statements? (Please mark one box for each item.)

	Disagree strongly	*Disagree*	*Agree*	*Agree strongly*
(a) The facilitator(s) began and ended sessions on time.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(b) The facilitator(s) helped the group set the ground rules for the discussion and stick to them.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(c) The facilitator(s) set a friendly and relaxed tone for the conversation.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(d) The facilitator(s) listened well.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(e) The facilitator(s) remained neutral.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(f) Group members were encouraged to talk to each other, not just to the facilitator(s).	❑	❑	❑	❑
(g) The facilitator(s) helped the group discuss different points of view productively.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(h) The facilitator(s) seemed to be familiar with the discussion materials.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(i) The facilitator(s) encouraged everybody in the group to participate in conversations.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(j) The facilitator(s) did a good job of keeping any one person from dominating the discussions.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(k) The facilitator(s) encouraged quiet members of the group to share their ideas.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(l) The facilitator(s) worked hard to keep the discussion on track.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(m) The facilitator(s) offered periodic summaries of the discussions, and/or encouraged group members to do so.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(n) The facilitator(s) made sure that someone took accurate notes about the group's concerns and action ideas.	❑	❑	❑	❑
(o) The facilitator(s) handled intense situations well.	❑	❑	❑	❑

5. Any other comments?

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Your name: (optional) _____

Reporting back to the Study Circles Resource Center

At the end of a round of study circles, please work with program organizers to complete this form and return it to: **Study Circles Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258.**

The more information you provide, the better! Please also send us any documentation, training materials, agendas, evaluation reports, or other materials that would help us to better understand your program's accomplishments and areas of growth.

Your name: _____

Your phone # /E-mail: _____

Your community's study circle program name: _____

Community, State: _____

Part 1: What's happening in your program when it comes to facilitation?

1. What issue is your program addressing?

_____

1a. Which study circle discussion guides are you using/have you used?

2. In ____ (*fill in current year*), how many facilitator trainings did you conduct?

3. To the best of your knowledge, how many facilitators have been trained throughout the life of your program?

4. How many facilitators did you train in ____ (*fill in current year*)?

5. To the best of your knowledge, what percentage of these newly trained facilitators went on to facilitate their own study circle(s)? _____%

Part 2: How are things going with the facilitation component of your study circle program, and what are you learning?

6. How would you rate your study circle program's facilitation trainings?

❑ excellent ❑ good ❑ only fair ❑ poor

Reason(s):

7. How would you rate the job that your facilitators are doing?

❑ excellent ❑ good ❑ only fair ❑ poor

Reason(s):

Over ▶▶▶

8. Describe your most rewarding experience with facilitation during this round of study circles:

9. Describe your most challenging experience with facilitation during this round of study circles:

10. Please share two lessons that you have learned about how to achieve quality facilitation in study circles:

1)

2)

Part 3: How are we doing at SCRC?

11. When it comes to ensuring quality facilitation in study circles, what services does SCRC currently provide that you find most useful?

12. Specifically, how important are the following services to the quality of the facilitation in your program? Are they very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important?

	Very important	*Somewhat important*	*Not very important*	*Not at all important*
(a) Tips to facilitators in the study circle discussion guide in use	❑	❑	❑	❑
(b) Having a copy of this training guide	❑	❑	❑	❑
(c) SCRC's guidelines on evaluating study circle facilitation	❑	❑	❑	❑
(d) Articles about facilitation and training in *Focus on Study Circles* (SCRC's quarterly newsletter)	❑	❑	❑	❑
(e) Training advice and assistance from SCRC staff	❑	❑	❑	❑
(f) Networking with experienced study circle organizers	❑	❑	❑	❑

13. When it comes to helping you ensure quality facilitation in your study circles, what would you like to see SCRC do differently in the future?

14. Other comments:

Thank you for filling us in!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES 6

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Resource Organizations

National Training Laboratory (NTL)
1240 North Pitt Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314-1403
(703) 548-8840; fax (703) 548-317

Offers trainings and workshops to support individual understanding of human relations and group dynamics, and publishes a variety of books and training products in the behavioral sciences, including the areas of diversity, group theory, organizational development, personal growth, and social change.

Roberts & Kay, Inc. (RKI)
250 Campsie Place
Lexington, KY
(606) 231-8308

Founded in 1983 by Steve Kay and Rona Roberts, this firm is dedicated to advancing the democratic practices of choice, equity, and connection in work places and communities. RKI has the experience and the skills to assist people in creating successful participative processes, strong organizations, and healthy communities. RKI's clients include small and large groups, private and public groups, prosperous organizations and struggling ones, and organizations with service areas ranging from neighborhood to nationwide.

Professional Organizations

National Association for
Community Mediation (NAFCM)
1726 M Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036-4502
(202) 467-6226; fax (202) 466-4769
E-mail <nafcm@nafcm.org>;
URL: http://www.nafcm.org/nafcm/

NAFCM serves as a national resource center for information on the development and practice of community mediation. It promotes the values, understanding, public awareness, and practice of community mediation and collaborative problem solving, and helps develop local and national community mediation leadership.

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National Institute for Dispute Resolution focuses its expertise, resources, and technical assistance on consensus building and conflict resolution. NIDR helps both providers and consumers of these services deepen their respective capacities to use consensus building and conflict resolution tools effectively. NIDR's Collaborative Communities Program focuses on helping communities use these powerful tools in pursuit of sustainability.

APPENDIX

Working on Common Cross-cultural Communication Challenges

by Marcelle E. DuPraw and Marya Axner

Ed. Note: This article first appeared in SCRC's publication, "Toward a More Perfect Union in an Age of Diversity." Because of the increasing cultural diversity in all communities across the United States, we include it here as good background for any study circle facilitator.

We all have an internal list of those we still don't understand, let alone appreciate. We all have biases, even prejudices, toward specific groups. In our workshops we ask people to gather in pairs and think about their hopes and fears in relating to people of a group different from their own. Fears usually include being judged, miscommunication, and patronizing or hurting others unintentionally; hopes are usually the possibility of dialogue, learning something new, developing friendships, and understanding different points of view. After doing this activity hundreds of times, I'm always amazed how similar the lists are. At any moment that we're dealing with people different from ourselves, the likelihood is that they carry a similar list of hopes and fears in their back pocket. – From *Waging Peace in Our Schools*, by Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti, Beacon Press, 1996

We all communicate with others all the time – in our homes, in our workplaces, in the groups we belong to, and in the community. No matter how well we think we understand each other, communication is hard. Just think, for example, how often we hear things like, "He doesn't get it," or "She didn't really hear what I meant to say."

"Culture" is often at the root of communication challenges. Our culture influences how we approach problems, and how we participate in groups and in communities. When we participate in groups we are often surprised at how differently people approach their work together.

Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply put, "culture" refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. It also includes groups we join or become part of. For example, we can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly, we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

Our histories are a critical piece of our cultures. Historical experiences – whether of five years ago or of ten generations back – shape who we are. Knowledge of our history can help us understand ourselves and one another better. Exploring the ways in which various groups within our society have related to each other is key to opening channels for cross-cultural communication.

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences

In a world as complex as ours, each of us is shaped by many factors, and culture is one of the powerful forces that acts on us. Anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black explain the

importance of culture this way: "...One's own culture provides the 'lens' through which we view the world; the 'logic'... by which we order it; the 'grammar' ... by which it makes sense." In other words, culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves.

As people from different cultural groups take on the exciting challenge of working together, cultural values sometimes conflict. We can misunderstand each other, and react in ways that can hinder what are otherwise promising partnerships. Oftentimes, we aren't aware that culture is acting upon us. Sometimes, we are not even aware that we have cultural values or assumptions that are different from others'!

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences – ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another – are described below. The descriptions point out some of the recurring causes of cross-cultural communication difficulties. As you enter into multicultural dialogue or collaboration, keep these generalized differences in mind. Next time you find yourself in a confusing situation, and you suspect that cross-cultural differences are at play, try reviewing this list. Ask yourself how culture may be shaping your own reactions, and try to see the world from others' points of view.

1. Different Communication Styles

The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of "yes" varies from "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so," with many shades in between.

Another major aspect of communication style is the degree of importance given to non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes not only facial expressions and gestures; it also involves seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness in communicating can add to cultural misunderstandings. For instance, some white Americans typically consider raised voices to be a sign that a fight has begun, while some black, Jewish and Italian Americans often feel that an increase in volume is a sign of an exciting conversation among friends. Thus, some white Americans may react with greater alarm to a loud discussion than would members of some American ethnic or non-white racial groups.

2. Different Attitudes Toward Conflict

Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict.

3. Different Approaches to Completing Tasks

From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move toward completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources, different judgments of the rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and varied ideas about how relationship building and task-oriented work should go together.

When it comes to working together effectively on a task, cultures differ with respect to the importance placed on establishing relationships early on in the collaboration. A case in point, Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared with European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let relationships develop as they work on the task. This does not mean that people from any one of these cultural backgrounds are more or less committed to accomplishing the task, or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

4. Different Decision-Making Styles

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S., decisions are frequently delegated – that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities oneself. When decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the U.S.; in Japan consensus is the preferred mode. Be aware that individuals' expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision may be influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

5. Different Attitudes Toward Disclosure

In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are in a dialogue or when you are working with others. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you – What was the conflict about? What was your role in the conflict? What was the sequence of events? – may seem intrusive to others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you have an accurate reading of the views, experiences, and goals of the people with whom you are working.

6. Different Approaches to Knowing

Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies – that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things. Compare that to African cultures' preference for affective ways of knowing – that is, knowledge that comes from the experience of something – including symbolic imagery and rhythm. Asian cultures' epistemologies tend to emphasize the validity of knowledge gained through striving toward transcendence.

Here, in the U.S., with all our cultural mixing and sharing, we can't apply these generalizations to whole groups of people. But we can use them to recognize that there is more than one way to look at the world and to learn. Recent popular works demonstrate that our own society is paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing. Indeed, these different approaches to knowing could affect ways of analyzing a community problem or finding ways to resolve it. Some members of your group may want to do library research to understand a shared problem better and identify possible solutions. Others may prefer to visit places and people who have experienced challenges like the ones you are facing, and get a feeling for what has worked elsewhere.

Respecting our differences and working together

In addition to helping us to understand ourselves and our own cultural frames of reference, knowledge of these six patterns of cultural difference can help us to understand the people who are different from us. An appreciation of patterns of cultural difference can assist us in processing what it means to be different in ways that are respectful of others, not faultfinding or damaging.

Anthropologists Avruch and Black have noted that, when faced by an interaction that we do not understand, people tend to interpret the others involved as "abnormal," "weird," or "wrong". This tendency, if indulged, gives rise on the individual level to prejudice. If this propensity is either consciously or unconsciously integrated into organizational structures, then prejudice takes root in our institutions – in the structures, laws, policies, and procedures that shape our lives. Consequently, it is vital that we learn to control the human tendency to translate "different from me" into "less than me." We can learn to do this.

We can also learn to collaborate across cultural lines as individuals and as a society. Awareness of cultural differences doesn't have to divide us from each other. It doesn't have to paralyze us either, for fear of not saying the "right thing." In fact, becoming more aware of our cultural differences, as well as exploring our similarities, can help us communicate with each other more effectively. Recognizing where cultural differences are at work is the first step toward understanding and respecting each other.

Learning about different ways that people communicate can enrich our lives. People's different communication styles reflect deeper philosophies and world views which are the foundation of their culture. Understanding these deeper philosophies gives us a broader picture of what the world has to offer us.

Learning about people's cultures has the potential to give us a mirror image of our own. We have the opportunity to challenge our assumptions about the "right" way of doing things, and consider a variety of approaches. We have a chance to learn new ways to solve problems that we had previously given up on, accepting the difficulties as "just the way things are."

Lastly, if we are open to learning about people from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energizes us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and worlds.

Cultural questions – about who we are and how we identify ourselves – are at the heart of [study circles], and will be at the heart of your discussions. As you set to work on multicultural collaboration in your community, keep in mind these additional guidelines:

- Learn from generalizations about other cultures, but don't use those generalizations to stereotype, "write off," or oversimplify your ideas about another person. The best use of a generalization is to add it to your storehouse of knowledge so that you better understand and appreciate other interesting, multifaceted human beings.
- Practice, practice, practice. That's the first rule, because it's in the doing that we actually get better at cross-cultural communication.
- Don't assume that there is one right way (yours!) to communicate. Keep questioning your assumptions about the "right way" to communicate. For example, think about your body language; postures that indicate receptivity in one culture might indicate aggressiveness in another.

- Don't assume that breakdowns in communication occur because other people are on the wrong track. Search for ways to make the communication work, rather than searching for who should receive the blame for the breakdown.
- Listen actively and empathetically. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Especially when another person's perceptions or ideas are very different from your own, you might need to operate at the edge of your own comfort zone.
- Respect others' choices about whether to engage in communication with you. Honor their opinions about what is going on.
- Stop, suspend judgment, and try to look at the situation as an outsider.
- Be prepared for a discussion of the past. Use this as an opportunity to develop an understanding from "the other's" point of view, rather than getting defensive or impatient. Acknowledge historical events that have taken place. Be open to learning more about them. Honest acknowledgment of the mistreatment and oppression that have taken place on the basis of cultural difference is vital for effective communication.
- Awareness of current power imbalances — and an openness to hearing each other's perceptions of those imbalances — is also necessary for understanding each other and working together.
- Remember that cultural norms may not apply to the behavior of any particular individual. We are all shaped by many, many factors — our ethnic background, our family, our education, our personalities — and are more complicated than any cultural norm could suggest. Check your interpretations if you are uncertain what is meant.

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i Avruch, Kevin and Peter Black, " Conflict Resolution in Intercultural Settings: Problems and Prospects," in Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application, edited by Dennis Sandole and Hugo van der Merwe. New York: St. Marti's Press, 1993.

ii This list and some of the explanatory text is drawn from DuPraw and Warfield (1991), and informally published workshop manual co-authored by one of the authors of this piece.

iii Nichols, Edwin J., a presentation made to the World Psychiatric Association and Association of Psychiatrists in Nigeria, November 10, 1976.

iv For example, for research on women's approaches to knowledge, se Lorraine Code, What Can She Know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge Ithaca: Cornell, 1991; M.F. Belenky, N.R. Goldberger, & J.M. Tarule, Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of the Self, Voice and Mind. New York: Basic Books, 1986; Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1982.

v Avruch and Black, 1993.

Four stages of group development and process

Groups, like individuals, go through stages in their development. B. W. Tuckman, a specialist in group development, describes the process in the following way: ***forming, storming, norming, and performing***. Keep in mind that while study circles may develop in this way, it is not necessarily a linear progression. Groups move back and forth among the various stages.

1 ***Forming*** is the initial period when group members are getting to know each other and figuring out how the group will work. Members may be polite or cautious, and often look to the facilitator for guidance.

2 ***Storming*** refers to the dynamic in a group when roles, status, and control are being explored. Sometimes one-on-one alliances form, and conflict may emerge.

3 ***Norming*** means the stage when the group "settles," and patterns of behavior and operation become established. Trust and satisfaction are usually high.

4 ***Performing*** is the stage when the group is working well to meet its goals. Members have found a level of comfort with each other. The group is making good progress, handles its conflicts successfully, and appreciates its diverse members.

Basic steps in creating a community-wide study circle program

Every community-wide program adds to the store of information about how to organize study circles. At SCRC we've tried to learn from every organizer, using each new lesson and innovation to modify the basic model. The following steps represent our most current thinking about what works best:

1. *Find a few allies.* Single out a few people you know well, have worked with before, and who would be excited about this project. Tell them your plans, and introduce them to the process by holding a single pilot study circle with this group.

2. *Begin building a* ***coalition,*** using pilot study circles. A sponsoring coalition is the organizing "engine" that makes study circles happen in a community. You need a wide variety of people and organizations, including some with high visibility on the issue, some with strong connections to the grass roots, and some on opposing sides of the issue you're addressing. Try to make the coalition a microcosm of the community. This phase of a study circle program is key; you are laying the foundation for all that follows, so don't hurry.

It is essential that as many of your coalition members as possible take part in pilot study circles. This introduces them to the process, builds relationships and trust, and equips them to be informed advocates for the program. Within the coalition there will probably be a smaller group of people who are involved more intensively in the program; this is often called the **working group**.

3. *Find a* ***coordinator.*** A good coordinator is the linchpin of a successful program. The ideal coordinator is an experienced organizer, is detail-oriented, works well with different kinds of people, and is well-connected to many sectors of the community. Sometimes, one of the organizations in the coalition can assign a salaried person to serve as a coordinator; other times, coalitions submit funding proposals to a local foundation or company to enable them to hire someone. Some communities get their programs started by enlisting volunteer coordinators, including graduate students, loaned executives, and recently retired people. A good rule of thumb is that a medium-sized or large city will probably require a full-time coordinator, while a town may be able to get by with a part-time coordinator.

4. Once the coordinator is on board and the coalition has made a commitment to move ahead, the first order of business is to create committees to handle the following tasks (these committees should be up-and-running at the same time):

- *Work with the media.* First try to recruit media outlets like newspapers and radio and television stations to join your coalition; in that capacity, they can play a much greater role in bringing a study circle effort to life than simply giving it some coverage. Develop press releases and public service announcements for all the media outlets in the community.
- *Plan for action.* Planning and publicizing the action component of your program will attract more participants and will help the program reach its potential to make a difference on the issue. The action committee should include professionals in the issue area. The committee should keep records of the themes and action ideas being brought up in the study circles, and use them to plan the **action forum** (this information can also be used in a program report). At the action forum, establish task forces to implement action ideas on those themes that emerged. For each task force, recruit one or two professionals in that area to serve as the initial convenors.

- *Develop a budget and plan for fundraising.* Though study circle programs are more labor-intensive than capital-intensive, you should make sure that your resources match your needs. In most cases, the two major budget items for study circle programs are the coordinator and the evaluation effort. If these costs can't be carried by the coalition, seek funding from a local institution such as a community foundation, large corporation, Chamber of Commerce, or city government.

- *Build documentation and evaluation into the program.* Through documentation and evaluation, you can better assess your program, learn about what kinds of effects it is having, and discover ways to strengthen it. These processes need to be part of the initial planning; they can't be accomplished after the study circles have ended. From start to finish, keep track of your efforts by creating and saving minutes of meetings, schedules and plans, lists of attendees, and the like. The evaluation committee should begin its work by describing the specific goals of the study circle program and deciding what kinds of things it wants to measure. For evaluation help, look for partners in the social science departments of a local university, in local government, and in local research firms.

- *Find, recruit, and train* ***facilitators.*** A well trained facilitator is the key to a well run study circle. That means you need to develop a strong capacity for finding and training facilitators. Fortunately, there are probably a number of people in your community who have experience training facilitators, whether in businesses, universities, religious organizations, or other community groups. The committee needs to find people who have good facilitation skills, conduct a number of trainings, and convene meetings of facilitators to support those who have already been trained.

- *Recruit* ***participants.*** Every organization in the coalition should take responsibility for recruiting a certain number of its constituents to be study circle participants. The recruitment committee should assist in these efforts, and also try to reach segments of the community not represented in the coalition. The committee will need to create basic outreach tools like brochures, small newsletter articles for school and church bulletins, one-page flyers, and sign-up sheets which can be distributed throughout the community.

- *Plan the kickoff.* The kickoff is a great opportunity to show the community that many different organizations are involved in the program, that community leaders have "bought in" to the idea, and that taking part in a study circle will give citizens a real opportunity to effect change on an issue they care about. The kickoff committee should plan an event which includes some combination of high-profile speakers, an explanation of the program, testimonials from people who participated in pilot study circles, and breakout study circle sessions.

- *Find sites and handle other logistical details.* Public buildings such as schools, libraries, church halls, community centers, businesses, firehouses, union halls, police departments, and social service agencies make excellent sites for study circles. The committee should set times and dates for all the different study circles, and develop a plan for matching study circle participants, facilitators, and sites. Also think about child care, transportation, food, translators, and accommodations for people with special needs. To ensure a mix of participants in each group, consider pairing organizations or gathering demographic information about participants when they sign up; most organizers use a strategy that combines both.

5. *Hold a public kickoff event to build momentum for the program.* Consider inviting high-profile speakers. Ask someone who participated in the pilot study circles to talk about the value of the process. Be sure to provide an opportunity for people to sign up to take part in the study circles. And remember to invite the media!

– Study circles happen all over the community –

(continued)

6. *Start the study circles.* It's important to monitor and support the study circles; plan on doing a fair amount of trouble-shooting while the study circles are underway. Be ready to start new study circles for late registrants, rather than allow them to join groups already in progress. Convene the facilitators so they can compare notes and get advice. Collect the records of themes and action ideas from each study circle. Encourage journalists to report on the study circles to the larger community.

7. *Hold an action forum.* This is an opportunity to bring participants together to share their concerns and ideas, plan action strategies, and celebrate their achievements.

8. *Support and track action efforts.* Stay in touch with the task force convenors and monitor their progress. Encourage media coverage of the task forces. Consider establishing a newsletter, and find other ways of publicizing the action efforts.

9. *Pause, reflect, and review what you've what you've learned.* How did things go? What went smoothly, and what caused difficulties? What did the evaluations show? Record (and applaud!) your achievements, and look for ways to make the program stronger. Give feedback and encouragement to volunteers. Integrate your learnings into your plans for the future.

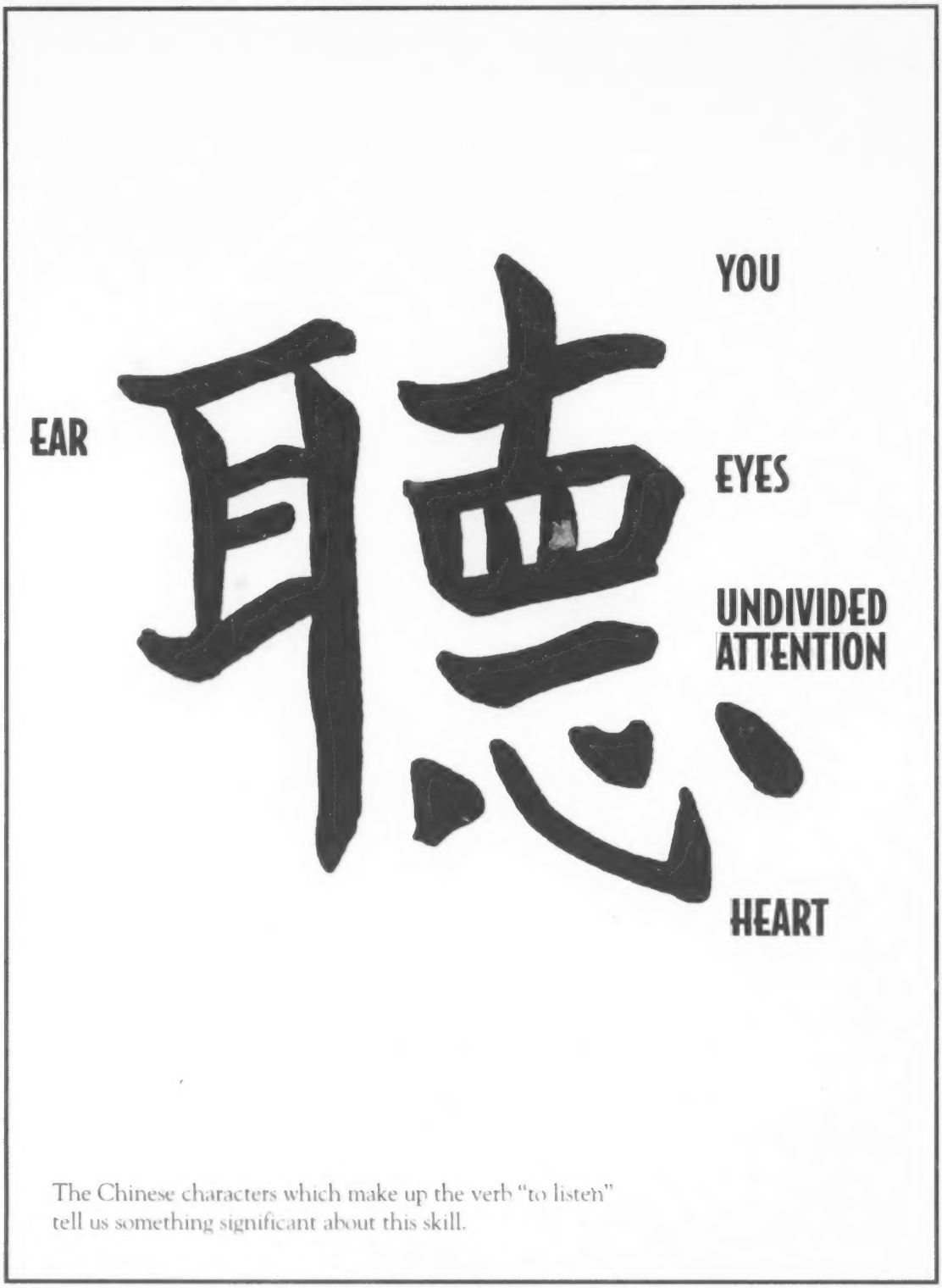
10. *Repeat steps 2-8.* Take advantage of the hard work that has gone into the first round of study circles by expanding the coalition and planning another round, either on the same issue or a new issue. In this way, you can sustain and deepen your study circle program and continue to build the civic life of your community.

Old woman/young woman

Can you see TWO women in this picture? One is very old, and one is very young. This illustrates what sometimes happens in a study circle. Through discussion and exploration, one comes to see an issue quite differently.

"The Old-Young Lady: A Classic Example," *Groups: Theory and Experience, Instructors Manual* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), pp. 7-8. Used with permission.

Chinese characters "To Listen"



The Chinese characters which make up the verb "to listen" tell us something significant about this skill.

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